



With vision dimmed

The great debate on Salt-2 is under way. Debaters beware: it can't all be checked

On Wednesday—19 months after it was supposed to happen—the United States announced that it had reached agreement with the Soviet Union on Salt-2, the treaty designed to limit long-range nuclear weapons. Only a few small details remain to be settled. The treaty and its associated documents are scheduled to be signed by Mr Carter and Mr Brezhnev in the middle of June, possibly in Vienna. Once the text—it will run to scores of pages—is released in two to three weeks' time, every clause will be examined microscopically. And behind all the argument about numbers, sizes and kinds of weapons, an even more nagging question will be asked about the principle of verification—the idea that each side should be able to assure itself that the other is keeping to the agreed limits.

The United States has always said that any treaty would have to be verifiable. This principle has been the bedrock of American arms control policy since the second world war. Many disarmament plans have foundered on it. Salt-1 was possible in 1972 because American reconnaissance satellite technology had by then progressed enough to be able to see and record the things described in the agreement. American officials have insisted that Salt-2 will have to be verifiable as well. But along the way two things have happened that make this, in any strict sense of the word, impossible.

First, Salt-2 now includes a lot of provisions which simply cannot be checked by satellites or any other available equipment. Nothing short of turning Russia into a completely open society would disclose some things the treaty sets limits on: the number of warheads invisibly packed into each missile nose cone; the range of cruise missiles (you can increase the range by replacing some of the warhead with some fuel inside an apparently unchanged weapon); improvements to the Backfire bomber. To complicate the checking business still more, the Russians will be allowed to send some of the telemetry data from their missile tests back to earth in secret code, although they have agreed not to codify information needed for the verification of Salt; and the administration is confident that Russian scrambling of signals the Americans want to read will be easily detectable. The Americans will have to take their word for it that the only data being "encrypted" is information on things not covered by Salt limitations.

What is "essential"?

Second, in addition to these inherently invisible things, the United States is going to have trouble checking everything that used to be checkable when it had monitoring equipment based in Iran. The loss of the Iranian watching-and-listening stations has set off a non-argument in the United States. The CIA director says it would take until about 1984 to replace them.

Salt-2 expires) before new equipment and techniques can make up for the loss in Iran. The secretary of defence says that "essential" checking can be resumed by next year. Depending on what you mean by "essential", there is no reason in logic why they cannot both be right. The main question, however, is not how long it will take to get back to some level of monitoring. It is whether it is right for the Carter administration to claim that the Salt-2 treaty will be verifiable when part of it isn't.

A political, not a scientific, judgment

The administration's argument is that (after the 12-month recovery-from-Iran period) some Russian violations might still remain undetected, but that any serious ones would be noticed in good time, the Russians would be warned and American counteraction taken if necessary. Maybe; maybe not. A lot will depend on a subjective judgment of how serious is serious. This judgment, because of the secrecy of the verification methods, will have to be made by officials in the White House, the state department and the defence department—men subject to the pull and push of political pressures, to the hope that they are wrong to suspect the Russians of cheating, to Russian protestations and political coercion—instead of by a technical finding based on clear treaty language. There have been several instances of alleged Russian violations of Salt-1 on which the experts could not agree, and Salt-1 was much easier to check than Salt-2 is going to be.

It does not constitute a denial of Mr Carter's good faith to worry that he, or some future president, might make an erroneous judgment under such pressures, perhaps leading to a damaging delay in the American response; on one of the many imprecise provisions of the Salt-2 treaty (What is a "launcher"? When is a mobile missile "deployed"? What is a "heavy bomber"? and that they might be swayed in making such a judgment by the domestic or international political mood at the time. Obviously, no American president will accept a clear-cut threat to his country's security. But he might be understandably reluctant, in so opaque a situation, to recognise the approach of such a threat until dangerously late in the day. This is not real "verification". Public opinion, both in the United States and in the rest of the non-communist world which also has a vital stake in Salt-2, understands that word to mean something different. It thinks it means that each detail of the treaty's specifications can and will be checked. The fact that the United States is about to sign a not-completely-verifiable treaty does not in itself mean that Salt-2 should be thrown out. It does mean that signing Salt-2 will unavoidably be a bit like